

Gunston Classics



SERIES MAGAZINE

Je sais tout

Magazine encyclopédique illustré

**With
Asène Lupin
THE GENTLEMAN
THIEF**

SHORT STORY SERIES

**A TRAGEDY IN THE
FOREST OF MORGUES**

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

Gunston Classics

Public Domain Series

Ex Libris



Digital Publishing Syndication



EST. 1999

© All rights of presented material, as presented are reserved.
No parts in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means are allowed to be copied without permission of Gunston Classics

GUNSTON CLASSICS
PO BOX 5905
BALTIMORE, MD 21282

GUNSTON CLASSICS

A Charitable Organization 85-1807-777

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES



A Short Story of Arsene Lupin from the collection:
1912

**THE CONFESSIONS
OF ARSÈNE LUPIN**
By
MAURICE LeBLANC

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

**THE MANY DISGUISES
OF**

Arsène Lupin

The Gentleman Burglar

**A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST
OF MORGUES**



A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES



SERIES STORY No. VII

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

The village was terror-stricken.

It was on a Sunday morning. The peasants of Saint-Nicolas and the neighbourhood were coming out of church and spreading across the square, when, suddenly, the women who were walking ahead and who had already turned into the high-road fell back with loud cries of dismay.

At the same moment, an enormous motor-car, looking like some appalling monster, came tearing into sight at a headlong rate of speed. Amid the shouts of the madly scattering people, it made straight for the

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

church, swerved, just as it seemed about to dash itself to pieces against the steps, grazed the wall of the presbytery, regained the continuation of the national road, dashed along, turned the corner and disappeared, without, by some incomprehensible miracle, having so much as brushed against any of the persons crowding the square.

But they had seen! They had seen a man in the driver's seat, wrapped in a goat-skin coat, with a fur cap on his head and his face disguised in a pair of large goggles, and, with him, on the front of that seat, flung back, bent in two, a woman whose head, all covered with blood, hung down over the bonnet....

And they had heard! They had heard the woman's screams, screams of horror, screams of agony....

And it was all such a vision of hell and carnage that the people stood, for some seconds, motionless, stupefied.

"Blood!" roared somebody.

There was blood everywhere, on the cobblestones of the square, on the ground hardened by the first frosts of autumn; and, when a number of men and boys rushed off in pursuit of the motor, they had but to take those sinister marks for their guide.

The marks, on their part, followed the high-road, but in a very strange manner, going from one side to the other and leaving a zigzag track, in the wake of the tires, that made those who saw it shudder. How was it that the car had not bumped against that tree? How had it been righted, instead of smashing into that bank? What novice, what madman, what drunkard, what frightened criminal was driving that motor-car with such astounding bounds and swerves?

One of the peasants declared:

"They will never do the turn in the forest."

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

And another said:

"Of course they won't! She's bound to upset!"

The Forest of Morgues began at half a mile beyond Saint-Nicolas; and the road, which was straight up to that point, except for a slight bend where it left the village, started climbing, immediately after entering the forest, and made an abrupt turn among the rocks and trees. No motor-car was able to take this turn without first slackening speed. There were posts to give notice of the danger.

The breathless peasants reached the quincunx of beeches that formed the edge of the forest. And one of them at once cried:

"There you are!"

"What?"

"Upset!"

The car, a limousine, had turned turtle and lay smashed, twisted and shapeless. Beside it, the woman's dead body. But the most horrible, sordid, stupefying thing was the woman's head, crushed, flattened, invisible under a block of stone, a huge block of stone lodged there by some unknown and prodigious agency. As for the man in the goat-skin coat he was nowhere to be found.

He was not found on the scene of the accident. He was not found either in the neighbourhood. Moreover, some workmen coming down the Côte de Morgues declared that they had not seen anybody.

The man, therefore, had taken refuge in the woods.

The gendarmes, who were at once sent for, made a minute search, assisted by the peasants, but discovered nothing. In the same way, the examining-magistrates, after a close inquiry lasting for several days,

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

found no clue capable of throwing the least light upon this inscrutable tragedy. On the contrary, the investigations only led to further mysteries and further improbabilities.

Thus it was ascertained that the block of stone came from where there had been a landslip, at least forty yards away. And the murderer, in a few minutes, had carried it all that distance and flung it on his victim's head.

On the other hand, the murderer, who was most certainly not hiding in the forest—for, if so, he must inevitably have been discovered, the forest being of limited extent—had the audacity, eight days after the crime, to come back to the turn on the hill and leave his goat-skin coat there. Why?

With what object? There was nothing in the pockets of the coat, except a corkscrew and a napkin. What did it all mean?

Inquiries were made of the builder of the motor-car, who recognized the limousine as one which he had sold, three years ago, to a Russian. The said Russian, declared the manufacturer, had sold it again at once. To whom? No one knew. The car bore no number.

Then again, it was impossible to identify the dead woman's body. Her clothes and underclothing were not marked in any way. And the face was quite unknown.

Meanwhile, detectives were going along the national road in the direction opposite to that taken by the actors in this mysterious tragedy. But who was to prove that the car had followed that particular road on the previous night?

They examined every yard of the ground, they questioned everybody. At last, they succeeded in learning that, on the Saturday evening, a limousine had stopped outside a grocer's shop in a small town situated about two hundred miles from Saint-Nicolas, on a highway branching

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

out of the national road. The driver had first filled his tank, bought some spare cans of petrol and lastly taken away a small stock of provisions: a ham, fruit, biscuits, wine and a half-bottle of Three Star brandy.

There was a lady on the driver's seat. She did not get down. The blinds of the limousine were drawn. One of these blinds was seen to move several times. The shopman was positive that there was somebody inside.

Presuming the shopman's evidence to be correct, then the problem became even more complicated, for, so far, no clue had revealed the presence of a third person.

Meanwhile, as the travellers had supplied themselves with provisions, it remained to be discovered what they had done with them and what had become of the remains.

The detectives retraced their steps. It was not until they came to the fork of the two roads, at a spot eleven or twelve miles from Saint-Nicolas, that they met a shepherd who, in answer to their questions, directed them to a neighbouring field, hidden from view behind the screen of bushes, where he had seen an empty bottle and other things.

The detectives were convinced at the first examination. The motor-car had stopped there; and the unknown travellers, probably after a night's rest in their car, had breakfasted and resumed their journey in the course of the morning.

One unmistakable proof was the half-bottle of Three Star brandy sold by the grocer. This bottle had its neck broken clean off with a stone. The stone employed for the purpose was picked up, as was the neck of the bottle, with its cork, covered with a tin-foil seal. The seal showed marks of attempts that had been made to uncork the bottle in the ordinary manner.

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

The detectives continued their search and followed a ditch that ran along the field at right angles to the road. It ended in a little spring, hidden under brambles, which seemed to emit an offensive smell. On lifting the brambles, they perceived a corpse, the corpse of a man whose head had been smashed in, so that it formed little more than a sort of pulp, swarming with vermin. The body was dressed in jacket and trousers of dark-brown leather. The pockets were empty: no papers, no pocket-book, no watch.

The grocer and his shopman were summoned and, two days later, formally identified, by his dress and figure, the traveller who had bought the petrol and provisions on the Saturday evening.

The whole case, therefore, had to be reopened on a fresh basis. The authorities were confronted with a tragedy no longer enacted by two persons, a man and a woman, of whom one had killed the other, but by three persons, including two victims, of whom one was the very man who was accused of killing his companion.

As to the murderer, there was no doubt: he was the person who travelled inside the motor-car and who took the precaution to remain concealed behind the curtains. He had first got rid of the driver and rifled his pockets and then, after wounding the woman, carried her off in a mad dash for death.

Given a fresh case, unexpected discoveries, unforeseen evidence, one might have hoped that the mystery would be cleared up, or, at least, that the inquiry would point a few steps along the road to the truth. But not at all. The corpse was simply placed beside the first corpse. New problems were added to the old. The accusation of murder was shifted from the one to the other. And there it ended. Outside those tangible, obvious facts there was nothing but darkness. The name of the woman, the name of the man, the name of the murderer were so many riddles. And then what had become of the murderer? If he had disappeared from one

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

moment to the other, that in itself would have been a tolerably curious phenomenon. But the phenomenon was actually something very like a miracle, inasmuch as the murderer had not absolutely disappeared. He was there! He made a practice of returning to the scene of the catastrophe! In addition to the goat-skin coat, a fur cap was picked up one day; and, by way of an unparalleled prodigy, one morning, after a whole night spent on guard in the rock, beside the famous turning, the detectives found, on the grass of the turning itself, a pair of motor-goggles, broken, rusty, dirty, done for. How had the murderer managed to bring back those goggles unseen by the detectives? And, above all, why had he brought them back?

Men's brains reeled in the presence of such abnormalities. They were almost afraid to pursue the ambiguous adventure. They received the impression of a heavy, stifling, breathless atmosphere, which dimmed the eyes and baffled the most clear-sighted.

The magistrate in charge of the case fell ill. Four days later, his successor confessed that the matter was beyond him.

Two tramps were arrested and at once released. Another was pursued, but not caught; moreover, there was no evidence of any sort or kind against him. In short, it was nothing but one helpless muddle of mist and contradiction.

An accident, the merest accident led to the solution, or rather produced a series of circumstances that ended by leading to the solution. A reporter on the staff of an important Paris paper, who had been sent to make investigations on the spot, concluded his article with the following words:

"I repeat, therefore, that we must wait for fresh events, fresh facts; we must wait for some lucky accident. As things stand, we are simply wasting our time. The elements of truth are not even sufficient to suggest a plausible theory. We are in the midst of the most absolute, painful,

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

impenetrable darkness. There is nothing to be done. All the Sherlock Holmeses in the world would not know what to make of the mystery, and Arsène Lupin himself, if he will allow me to say so, would have to pay forfeit here."

On the day after the appearance of that article, the newspaper in question printed this telegram:

"Have sometimes paid forfeit, but never over such a silly thing as this. The Saint-Nicolas tragedy is a mystery for babies.

"Arsène Lupin."

And the editor added:

"We insert this telegram as a matter of curiosity, for it is obviously the work of a wag. Arsène Lupin, past-master though he be in the art of practical joking, would be the last man to display such childish flippancy."

Two days elapsed; and then the paper published the famous letter, so precise and categorical in its conclusions, in which Arsène Lupin furnished the solution of the problem. I quote it in full:

"Sir:

"You have taken me on my weak side by defying me. You challenge me, and I accept the challenge. And I will begin by declaring once more that the Saint-Nicolas tragedy is a mystery for babies. I know nothing so simple, so natural; and the proof of the simplicity shall lie in the succinctness of my demonstration. It is contained in these few words: when a crime seems to go beyond the ordinary scope of things, when it seems unusual and stupid, then there are many chances that its explanation is to be found in superordinary, supernatural, superhuman motives.

"I say that there are many chances, for we must always allow for the part played by absurdity in the most logical and commonplace events. But, of

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

course, it is impossible to see things as they are and not to take account of the absurd and the disproportionate.

"I was struck from the very beginning by that very evident character of unusualness. We have, first of all, the awkward, zigzag course of the motor-car, which would give one the impression that the car was driven by a novice. People have spoken of a drunkard or a madman, a justifiable supposition in itself. But neither madness nor drunkenness would account for the incredible strength required to transport, especially in so short a space of time, the stone with which the unfortunate woman's head was crushed. That proceeding called for a muscular power so great that I do not hesitate to look upon it as a second sign of the unusualness that marks the whole tragedy. And why move that enormous stone, to finish off the victim, when a mere pebble would have done the work? Why again was the murderer not killed, or at least reduced to a temporary state of helplessness, in the terrible somersault turned by the car? How did he disappear? And why, having disappeared, did he return to the scene of the accident? Why did he throw his fur coat there; then, on another day, his cap; then, on another day, his goggles?

"Unusual, useless, stupid acts.

"Why, besides, convey that wounded, dying woman on the driver's seat of the car, where everybody could see her? Why do that, instead of putting her inside, or flinging her into some corner, dead, just as the man was flung under the brambles in the ditch?

"Unusualness, stupidity.

"Everything in the whole story is absurd. Everything points to hesitation, incoherency, awkwardness, the silliness of a child or rather of a mad, blundering savage, of a brute.

"Look at the bottle of brandy. There was a corkscrew: it was found in the pocket of the great coat. Did the murderer use it? Yes, the marks of the corkscrew can be seen on the seal. But the operation was too complicated for him. He broke the neck with a stone. Always stones: observe that detail.

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

They are the only weapon, the only implement which the creature employs. It is his customary weapon, his familiar implement. He kills the man with a stone, he kills the woman with a stone and he opens bottles with a stone!

"A brute, I repeat, a savage; disordered, unhinged, suddenly driven mad. By what? Why, of course, by that same brandy, which he swallowed at a draught while the driver and his companion were having breakfast in the field. He got out of the limousine, in which he was travelling, in his goat-skin coat and his fur cap, took the bottle, broke off the neck and drank. There is the whole story. Having drunk, he went raving mad and hit out at random, without reason. Then, seized with instinctive fear, dreading the inevitable punishment, he hid the body of the man. Then, like an idiot, he took up the wounded woman and ran away. He ran away in that motor-car which he did not know how to work, but which to him represented safety, escape from capture.

"But the money, you will ask, the stolen pocket-book? Why, who says that he was the thief? Who says that it was not some passing tramp, some labourer, guided by the stench of the corpse?

"Very well, you object, but the brute would have been found, as he is hiding somewhere near the turn, and as, after all, he must eat and drink.

"Well, well, I see that you have not yet understood. The simplest way, I suppose, to have done and to answer your objections is to make straight for the mark. Then let the gentlemen of the police and the gendarmerie themselves make straight for the mark. Let them take firearms. Let them explore the forest within a radius of two or three hundred yards from the turn, no more. But, instead of exploring with their heads down and their eyes fixed on the ground, let them look up into the air, yes, into the air, among the leaves and branches of the tallest oaks and the most unlikely beeches. And, believe me, they will see him. For he is there. He is there, bewildered, piteously at a loss, seeking for the man and woman whom he has killed, looking for them and waiting for them and not daring to go away and quite unable to understand.

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

"I myself am exceedingly sorry that I am kept in town by urgent private affairs and by some complicated matters of business which I have to set going, for I should much have liked to see the end of this rather curious adventure.

"Pray, therefore excuse me to my kind friends in the police and permit me to be, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"Arsène Lupin."

The upshot will be remembered. The "gentlemen of the police and the gendarmerie" shrugged their shoulders and paid no attention to this lucubration. But four of the local country gentry took their rifles and went shooting, with their eyes fixed skyward, as though they meant to pot a few rooks. In half an hour they had caught sight of the murderer. Two shots, and he came tumbling from bough to bough. He was only wounded, and they took him alive.

That evening, a Paris paper, which did not yet know of the capture, printed the following paragraphs:

"Enquiries are being made after a M. and Mme. Bragoff, who landed at Marseilles six weeks ago and there hired a motor-car. They had been living in Australia for many years, during which time they had not visited Europe; and they wrote to the director of the Jardin d'Acclimatation, with whom they were in the habit of corresponding, that they were bringing with them a curious creature, of an entirely unknown species, of which it was difficult to say whether it was a man or a monkey.

"According to M. Bragoff, who is an eminent archæologist, the specimen in question is the anthropoid ape, or rather the ape-man, the existence of which had not hitherto been definitely proved. The structure is said to be exactly similar to that of *Pithecanthropus erectus*, discovered by Dr. Dubois in Java in 1891.

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

"This curious, intelligent and observant animal acted as its owner's servant on their property in Australia and used to clean their motor-car and even attempt to drive it.

"The question that is being asked is where are M. and Mme. Bragoff? Where is the strange primate that landed with them at Marseilles?"

The answer to this question was now made easy. Thanks to the hints supplied by Arsène Lupin, all the elements of the tragedy were known. Thanks to him, the culprit was in the hands of the law.

You can see him at the Jardin d'Acclimatation, where he is locked up under the name of "Three Stars." He is, in point of fact, a monkey; but he is also a man. He has the gentleness and the wisdom of the domestic animals and the sadness which they feel when their master dies. But he has many other qualities that bring him much closer to humanity: he is treacherous, cruel, idle, greedy and quarrelsome; and, above all, he is immoderately fond of brandy.

Apart from that, he is a monkey. Unless indeed ...!

A few days after Three Stars' arrest, I saw Arsène Lupin standing in front of his cage. Lupin was manifestly trying to solve this interesting problem for himself. I at once said, for I had set my heart upon having the matter out with him:

"You know, Lupin, that intervention of yours, your argument, your letter, in short, did not surprise me so much as you might think!"

"Oh, really?" he said, calmly. "And why?"

"Why? Because the incident has occurred before, seventy or eighty years ago. Edgar Allan Poe made it the subject of one of his finest tales. In those circumstances, the key to the riddle was easy enough to find."

Arsène Lupin took my arm, and walking away with me, said:

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

"When did you guess it, yourself?"

"On reading your letter," I confessed.

"And at what part of my letter?"

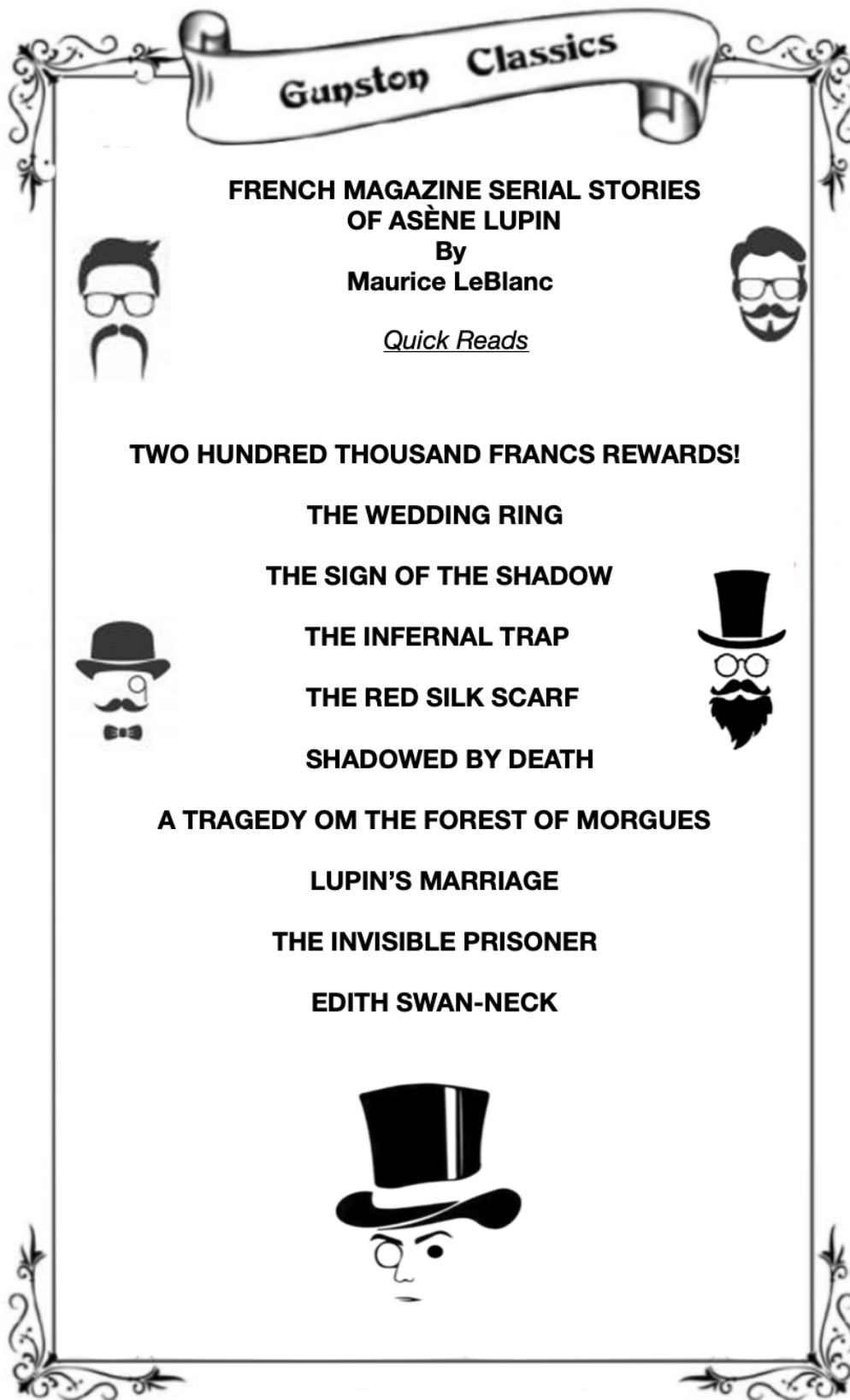
"At the end."

"At the end, eh? After I had dotted all the i's. So here is a crime which accident causes to be repeated, under quite different conditions, it is true, but still with the same sort of hero; and your eyes had to be opened, as well as other people's. It needed the assistance of my letter, the letter in which I amused myself—apart from the exigencies of the facts—by employing the argument and sometimes the identical words used by the American poet in a story which everybody has read. So you see that my letter was not absolutely useless and that one may safely venture to repeat to people things which they have learnt only to forget them."

Wherewith Lupin turned on his heel and burst out laughing in the face of an old monkey, who sat with the air of a philosopher, gravely meditating.

FIN

A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES



A TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST OF MORGUES

Arsène Lupin

Fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created by French writer Maurice Leblanc

Arsène Lupin is a fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created in 1905 by French writer Maurice Leblanc. The character was first introduced in a series of short stories serialized in the magazine *Je sais tout*. The first story, "The Arrest of Arsène Lupin", was published on 15 July 1905. Lupin is often described as the criminal counterpart to Sherlock Holmes, often encountering "Herlock Sholmès" in his own adventures. The character has also appeared in a number of books by other writers as well as numerous films, stage plays,

